

MEXICO AND THE TRIPLE THREAT

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Trying to decipher the news coming out of Mexico these days is enough to give an observer whiplash. The signals are conflicting to say the least. On the one hand, there are horrific accounts of the most brutal violence, including beheadings and disembowelments. On the other hand, there are encouraging reports that the country is making economic and other headway, so much so that levels of illegal immigration to the United States are declining.¹ In point of fact, both depictions are true. But consolidating the latter gains, so they take further root and help improve the lot of an ever-wider circle of Mexico's people, will require stability. And that is an element in short supply today, thanks to the hybrid of crime, terrorist tactics, and insurgency, particularly in the five Mexican states where violence is the most highly concentrated.

Start with crime, meaning the “organized” variety that has significant impact on society at large. Think narco-trafficking, kidnapping, and extortion, to name a few. Drug trafficking in Mexico is big, if illicit, business. The most notorious players include the Sinaloa Cartel, the Gulf Cartel, Los Zetas, Juarez Cartel, and La Familia Michoacana. Profits are huge, and the enterprise is sprawling, reaching into the United States, Central America, and beyond. In recent testimony, the Assistant Administrator and Chief of Intelligence for the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) estimated that \$322 billion is generated annually by the global trade.² Others adjudge that \$19 to \$29 billion in monies from the drug trade conducted by transnational criminal organizations flows into Mexico from the United States each year.³ The problem didn't originate in Mexico, but migrated there in force after Colombia cracked down on its own drug lords. As Mexican authorities attempt to put on the squeeze, the kingpins have sought sanctuary in Central America. Only a regional response will help prevent them from seeking and gaining footholds in nearby countries that are ill-equipped to deal with the challenge. America's partnership with Mexico under the rubric of the Merida Initiative (detailed below), and other U.S. partnerships with neighbors—such as the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative, and the Central American Regional Security Initiative—aim to contain the spread of the problem. But some have pointed out the limited capacity of partners in the region to absorb this U.S. assistance.⁴ In short, the illegal drug business continues to thrive amidst a global economic downturn.

In-country, the Mexican drug cartels have become so powerful that they threaten, if not effectively supplant, the state in certain parts of the country. Using merciless intimidation, the narco-traffickers have managed to subdue these local populations and secure their de facto allegiance. As one analyst describes, the Zetas for instance, “seek to dominate the political life of a community, controlling the community's ability to organize and interact with the state, determining the extent and functions of local government, and sometimes even exercising quasi-control over the local territory.”⁵ Observers

¹ Damien Cave, “Better Lives for Mexicans Cut Allure of Going North,” *New York Times* (July 6, 2011). Accessed online at <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2011/07/06/world/americas/immigration.html>.

² Testimony of Rodney G. Benson before the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee, Committee on Foreign Affairs, and the Oversight, Investigations and Management Subcommittee, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives (October 4, 2011). Accessed online at <http://homeland.house.gov/sites/homeland.house.gov/files/Testimony%20Benson.pdf>.

³ Testimony of Dr. Gary M. Shiffman, Adjunct Professor, Center for Peace and Security Studies, Georgetown University, before the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives (September 13, 2011). Accessed online at <http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/112/shi091311.pdf>.

⁴ See for example the testimony of Dr. Vanda Felbab-Brown, Fellow, Brookings Institution, before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps and Global Narcotics Affairs, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (March 31, 2011). Accessed online at http://www.brookings.edu/testimony/2011/0331_counternarcotics_felbabbrown.aspx.

⁵ *Ibid.*

differ on how to characterize this situation. Some, including inside the U.S. Government (USG), have called it an insurgency or a narco-insurgency—although a few of these comments (including from USG sources) were later walked back.⁶ Mexican President Calderon himself has bluntly characterized the violent activities of the cartels as follows: “Their business is no longer just the traffic of drugs. Their business is to dominate everyone else. … This criminal behavior is what has changed and become a defiance to the state, an attempt to replace the state…”.⁷

Yet others reject the categorization altogether, saying there is no insurgency, in part because the cartels do not seek political control per se. Whatever one’s view—ours, based on the available evidence, is that one would be hard-pressed to deny the existence of a narco-insurgency—there is clearly a serious problem when there are 15,000-plus drug-related homicides in a single year (2010), and almost 43,000 drug-related deaths in the past five years.⁸ And those simply in the business of reporting on these developments are at serious risk. Mexico has been described as one of the world’s most dangerous places to be a journalist⁹ and the mounting evidence in this regard is gruesome. Just weeks ago, for instance, the editor of a Nuevo Laredo newspaper was decapitated. The perpetrators left behind a note with her body, saying the slaying was linked to the editor’s online postings about organized crime. Also last month in the same border city, two brutally desecrated bodies were found hanging from a bridge, along with signs intended to intimidate and warn people against using social media to condemn the drug cartels, as these victims had done.¹⁰

The bad news doesn’t stop there. Just as the cartels and other criminals have adopted the grisly tactics, techniques, and procedures of terrorists, so too have terrorist groups undertaken a range of illicit activities, including smuggling and kidnapping, to fill their coffers and further their own ends. After all, at the end of the day, smuggling is smuggling is smuggling—whether it be drugs, people, or weapons, the routes are the same. Add to this mix technology, such as smartphones and social media, which have served to sharpen and expand the capabilities, capacities, and aspirations of criminals, terrorists, and insurgents. Differences in motivation between and among these actors (such as ideology versus desire for financial gain) may matter little, for practical purposes, where interests converge and intersect. Already we have seen at least one “controversial imam” smuggled across America’s southwestern border by “a Tijuana-based smuggling group.”¹¹ U.S. security and intelligence officials are concerned that this type of activity could become more institutionalized and more worrisome, as major Mexican drug cartels “could form a profitable partnership with terrorists to

⁶ See for example Tom A. Peter, “Mexico denies Hillary Clinton’s ‘insurgency’ comparison,” *The Christian Science Monitor* (September 9, 2010). Accessed online at <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/terrorism-security/2010/0909/Mexico-denies-Hillary-Clinton-s-insurgency-comparison>. See also Frank James, “Obama Rejects Hillary Clinton Mexico-Colombia Comparison,” *NPR’s News Blog* (September 9, 2010). Accessed online at <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2010/09/09/129760276/obama-rejects-hillary-clinton-mexico-colombia-comparison>.

CNN Wire Staff, “Army undersecretary backs off comments about Mexico ‘insurgency’,” *CNN.com* (February 8, 2011). Accessed online at http://articles.cnn.com/2011-02-08/us/us.mexico.military_1_drug-cartels-fight-drug-gangs-insurgency?_s=PM:US.

⁷ Tracy Wilkinson, “Calderon delivers blunt view of drug cartels’ sway in Mexico,” *Los Angeles Times* (August 4, 2010). Accessed online at <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/aug/04/world/la-fg-mexico-calderon-20100805>.

⁸ DEA/Benson Testimony, *supra*.

⁹ “UN human rights office concerned about killing of journalists in Mexico,” *UN News Service* (September 30, 2011). Accessed online at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=39896&Cr=drug+trafficking&Cr1=>.

¹⁰ Mariano Castillo, “Bodies hanging from bridge in Mexico are warning to social media users,” *CNN* (September 14, 2011). Accessed online at http://articles.cnn.com/2011-09-14/world/mexico.violence_1_zetas-cartel-social-media-users-nuevo-laredo?_s=PM:WORLD.

¹¹ Richard Marosi, “Controversial Muslim cleric is arrested while sneaking into the U.S.,” *Los Angeles Times* (January 27, 2011). Accessed online at <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/jan/27/local/la-me-border-cleric-20110127>.

smuggle weapons and equipment into the U.S. through existing drug routes.”¹² Homeland Security Secretary Napolitano has herself stated bluntly and openly: “we have, for some time, been thinking about what would happen if say Al Qaeda were to unite with the Zetas...”.¹³

Indeed, the type of scenario one would hope to see only in a Hollywood screenplay—complete with “conspiracy to murder a foreign official, conspiracy to use a weapon of mass destruction and conspiracy to commit an act of international terrorism”—appears to have materialized and was shared with the public by U.S. authorities just days ago. The indictment details and alleges “a \$1.5 million assassination plot...conceived,... sponsored...and directed from Iran...”. The target to be dispatched on U.S. soil was the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the United States, with that being just the first salvo in a series. The hired killers were to be Mexican drug cartel hitmen. In the end, the plot was thwarted by the efforts of, and solid cooperation between and among, the DEA, the FBI, and their Mexican counterparts. Nevertheless, the apparent evidence of would-be terrorists’ desire to cooperate with narco-criminals is disturbing—even though the outreach and transactions conducted by those charged in this case were (unwittingly) directed towards a DEA informant posing as a Zeta cartel member.¹⁴

How to fight back effectively against such a complex multidimensional threat? In kind is a good place to start, meaning with a multidimensional response that incorporates law enforcement, intelligence, and military components, as well as socio-economic and politico-institutional measures. Since taking office in December 2006, President Calderon and his government have attempted to do just that, by (among other things) deploying tens of thousands of troops to support law enforcement efforts, and pursuing vigorously government officials who have betrayed the public trust by accepting bribes from the cartels. The scale of the problem is striking: even the Deputy Attorney General is alleged to have been on the cartels’ payroll, collecting almost half a million dollars each month, intended for him to protect rather than prosecute the cartels.¹⁵ More encouragingly, the number of federal police officers has increased more than five-fold (to the current 35,000) over the course of President Calderon’s tenure; and approximately one-fifth of the force is college-educated.¹⁶ Further, Mexico’s high-value arrests and extraditions to the United States continue, as does a multi-year trend indicating both rising prices and decreasing purity of illegal drugs, including cocaine.¹⁷ But time will tell whether these positive trajectories and developments are lasting or fleeting, because the targets of these efforts seek to adapt to, and may ultimately evade, government action directed against them. Institutional advances are slower to take hold moreover, and until endemic corruption for example is rooted out of the political and legal/judicial spheres, including at the state and local levels where the problem is currently most acute, the foundation upon which Mexico is to build will remain porous

¹² Jordy Yager, “Napolitano warns of threat from homegrown radicalization, terrorism,” *The Hill* (February 9, 2011). Accessed online at <http://thehill.com/homenews/house/143127-napolitano-warns-lawmakers-of-threat-from-homegrown-radicalization-domestic-terrorism?page=1#comments>.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *United States of America v. Manssor Arbabsiar and Gholam Shakuri*. Accessed online at http://www.cbsnews.com/htdocs/pdf/Amended_Complaint.pdf?tag=contentMain;contentBody.

¹⁵ DEA/Benson Testimony, *supra*.

¹⁶ Shannon K. O’Neil, “Evaluating Mexico’s ‘New Security Model’,” *Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) Blog* (July 25, 2011). Accessed online at <http://blogs.cfr.org/oneil/2011/07/25/evaluating-mexico%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%9Cnew-security-model%E2%80%9D/>.

¹⁷ DEA/Benson Testimony, *supra*.

and at risk. Strategy and doctrine (including their implementation and execution) to best tackle the triple threat is therefore still a work in progress in Mexico.

The same is true of strategy and doctrine on the U.S. side, where “spillover” effects are in evidence up to and including the northeast and northwest regions of the country, where Mexican drug trafficking organizations have established a presence. Note that the term spillover is used loosely here, as it suggests clear and unidirectional causality, rather than the complex inter-linkages that actually exist. It could be (and has been) argued for example, that U.S. demand for drugs and the flow of weapons across the U.S. southern border constitute substantial parts of the problem. Finger-pointing aside, the facts on the ground mandate a response. The question is what shape that will take. And the answer is complicated by the long and tangled history shared by the two countries—one legacy of which is a heightened sensitivity to, and appreciation of, matters of sovereignty, both actual and perceived. In consequence, measures applied in a different context may be nonstarters in this one, despite a positive track record in past. To wit Plan Colombia, which incorporated a heavy dose of U.S. assistance to, and involvement in, a range of integrated initiatives, including counternarcotics and counterinsurgency.¹⁸

In present context, the U.S. introduced a bilateral program with Mexico in 2007, known as the Merida Initiative. As explained in recent testimony by the Department of State’s Assistant Secretary, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, the Merida Initiative originally “aimed to utilize our foreign assistance mechanisms to provide specific equipment and training that the Government of Mexico identified. These resources requirements were designed to endow many of Mexico’s federal authorities with specific tools necessary to confront cartels where they operate and to enable the provision of justice at the federal level.”¹⁹ Over time the partnership has evolved, such that today the Merida Initiative is guided by “a four-pillar strategy that aims to: 1) disrupt the capacity of organized crime to operate; 2) institutionalize reforms to sustain the rule of law and respect for human rights; 3) create a 21st century border; and 4) build strong and resilient communities.”²⁰ The shift in focus is thus towards multi-faceted engagement with Mexico, intended to help foster strong institutions and a vibrant civil society there. Notably, the vision underpinning the Initiative recognizes that the “border and the interior are inextricably linked,” and so too are security and prosperity (in both countries)—hence the need for a “holistic” or “comprehensive” approach to border management and beyond.²¹

Moving forward, the Merida Initiative will continue to morph and mature. Its next phase will seek to support state-level law enforcement capacity in Mexico. Critics argue, however, that the Merida Initiative itself is flawed, plagued by delays and challenges in implementation, a relative absence of clearly defined goals and associated timelines, and insufficient integration into a broader whole-of-

¹⁸ Department of State Fact Sheet Released by the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, “United States Support For Colombia,” (March 28, 2000). Accessed online at http://www.state.gov/www/regions/wha/colombia/fs_000328_plancolombia.html.

¹⁹ Testimony of William R. Brownfield before the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee, Committee on Foreign Affairs, and the Oversight, Investigations and Management Subcommittee, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives (October 4, 2011). Accessed online at <http://www.state.gov/p/inl/rls/rm/174982.htm>.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Testimony of Mariko Silver, Assistant Secretary of International Affairs (Acting), Department of Homeland Security, before the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee, Committee on Foreign Affairs, and the Oversight, Investigations and Management Subcommittee, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives (October 4, 2011). Accessed online at <http://homeland.house.gov/sites/homeland.house.gov/files/Testimony%20Silver.pdf>.

government, and western hemispheric, approach that recognizes and effectively responds to both the scale and complexity of existing circumstances and realities.²² Ironically, the present situation is to some extent a function of earlier successes generated by Merida measures and the Government of Mexico's own efforts. Together these helped winnow the size of the major cartels. But the unintended consequence was a splintering of these groups, so that now there are more than before. Although the principal players among them are each smaller, their ferocity is undiminished—as regards their tactics, and more importantly, their drive to compete with and marginalize the state in so far as it is deemed to interfere with the cartels' profit-making. At the same time, these entities continue to think and operate transnationally, always on the lookout for workarounds and footholds in new locales as pressure is applied by U.S. and Mexican authorities, individually and in tandem. With this in mind, even the most powerful bilateral partnership would come up short. For this reason, a neighborhood-wide clampdown is needed. Increasingly involving others in the region, such as Colombia—including on a bilateral basis, between Mexico and third countries—would also inject a cultural and linguistic frame of reference, as well as meaningful and granular (historical and ongoing) experiences and lessons learned, that the United States simply cannot bring to the table.

Yet there is more that we (the U.S.) could do, including in terms of border security and enforcement. Whether it is drugs or weapons being trafficked, the illicit enterprise operates like a business—which presents opportunities and tools for U.S. and counterpart authorities to exploit for the purpose of counter-attack. The White House *Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime*²³, introduced in July 2011, implicitly accepts this conceptual framework. However, as one analyst observes, “we have only a limited idea of how the Mexican trafficking organizations operate in the United States. ... It is critical to develop a systematic mapping of transnational crime organizations in the United States that takes into particular account the way they move money southward. In contrast to terrorist financing, we have few sustained efforts to pursue drug trafficking in the same way.” Further, he argues, “we could do a far better job of intercepting illegal arms shipments headed south to Mexico. Even within existing law, we can do far more to develop an effective mapping of how the trafficking organizations purchase and move weapons across the border.” In both cases, the goal would be to develop the intelligence needed to better track and locate/seize the cash and the weapons before they reach border—at which point the task of catching either is exponentially more difficult, because concealment efforts are then at their peak.²⁴

In addition to this type of careful, patient work that supports operations, we must also do the hard strategic thinking to further develop a comprehensive (multi-dimensional, multi-instrument) plan to work with Mexico to help create and reinforce the institutional and social foundations and developments needed to achieve strategic success in the long run. This undertaking will be especially

²² See for example the opening and closing remarks by Representative (and Western Hemisphere Subcommittee Chairman) Connie Mack (R – FL) at the hearing of the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, and the Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights and Oversight, Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, titled “Has Merida Evolved? Part One: The Evolution of Drug Cartels and the Threat to Mexico’s Governance,” (September 13, 2011). Accessed webcast online at http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing_notice.asp?id=1348.

²³ Subtitled, *Addressing Converging Threats to National Security*. Accessed online at http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/Strategy_to_Combat_Transnational_Organized_Crime_July_2011.pdf.

²⁴ Testimony of Andrew Selee before the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives (September 13, 2011). Accessed online at <http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/112/sel091311.pdf>.

challenging at a time of domestic and international economic turbulence and restraint. Granted, policy without resources is rhetoric—but we must also try to work smarter and better.

Facts on the ground continue to mutate. Recent mass killings have led some, including local (Mexican) media, to speculate about “the emergence of paramilitary vengeance squads” in Mexico.²⁵ The so-called Zeta Killers group, for example, announced in July via YouTube video that they would rid the Mexican state of Veracruz of Zeta criminals, which have long kept a fierce grip on the state and the country’s largest port (of the same name).²⁶ Mexican authorities assert, however, that the Zeta Killers group is simply “another organized crime gang that opposes the Zetas, with whom they are fighting for control of illicit income and criminal activities in Veracruz.”²⁷ Looking ahead, there will no doubt be other important developments that continue to change and unsettle the equation. The question remains, therefore, whether strategy and doctrine in Mexico, in the United States, and in the region can and will keep pace with the triple threat—mixing crime, terrorist tactics, and insurgency—that is at once adaptive, lethal, and determined. Until our thinking ripens across the board, so as to lay the groundwork for a posture that is powerfully suited to the prevailing threat climate, both the United States and Mexico will continue to play catch-up to the constellation of forces that presently bedevil innocent Mexican civilians most of all.

²⁵ Associated Press, “Marines: ‘Zeta Killers’ gang responsible for 32 more killings in Southern Mexico,” *Washington Post* (October 7, 2011). Accessed online at http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/americas/marines-zeta-killers-gang-responsible-for-32-more-killings-in-southern-mexico/2011/10/07/gIQAyBhgSL_story.html.

²⁶ Tim Johnson, “Paramilitaries may have entered Mexico’s drug wars,” *McClatchy Newspapers* (October 7, 2011). Accessed online at <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2011/10/07/126565/paramilitaries-may-have-entered.html>. See also George W. Grayson, *Threat Posed by Mounting Vigilantism in Mexico* (September 2011), U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute. Accessible at <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=1082>.

²⁷ Associated Press, *supra* note 25.